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ADIÓS

A Future to Wince At

By ANTHONY DePALMA

Correction Appended

HAVANA

A SIMPLE rule that correspondents follow is, “The bigger the news, the smaller the story.” In other words, to bring home the impact of a monumental event, tell how it touches ordinary people. In the last few days, on a trip to [Cuba](#) that was in every way supposed to be about the lives of ordinary people — my own family — the big news story found me.

The visit started as a reunion in Cuba of two sides of our family whom international politics had kept divided for decades.

My wife, Miriam, left behind much of her family when her grandmother whisked her out of Cuba in 1962. She and I had visited over the years, but she always was afraid to bring our three children, fearing they might somehow be snatched from her. But now that they are adults, she wanted them to know the grandmother they had never kissed, and the tragic homeland they had only seen in photos.

We arrived not at the fine new airport in Havana I’ve used many times as a correspondent, but at a smaller, more crowded one that Cuba uses for these family visits, as if to rebuke exiles for having left.

Our reunion was delayed, however, by the surprise announcement last Tuesday that [Fidel Castro](#) — whose revolution had torn the family apart — was too ill to return to power. Suddenly, I was at work.

When the Cuban National Assembly meets today to pick a president and commander in chief, it won’t be Fidel Castro. But nobody can be sure whether his vow to step aside offers a distant hope of mending the breach between Cuba and the United States, or is just a reminder of how difficult that would be.

Still, what most surprised us was how little Cubans clamored for drastic change. Dictator or hero, Mr. Castro’s grip on power was ending, and no one seemed to care. Miriam was disappointed that the streets of Matanzas, Havana, San Agustín and Guanabacoa, the working class city across Havana Bay where she grew up, were tranquil, as if nothing at all had happened.

Of course we understood that things are not always as they seem, and that became clear when the maid in our 133-year-old hotel came to mop up the mess caused by a leaking pipe. Hearing the lilt of Miriam’s Spanish put her at ease. After chatting for a few minutes, she poked her head into the hallway to check for supervisors and shut the door. Only then did she speak from the heart.

“Nobody says it, but everybody knows that someone new could be worse than what we have now,” she whispered. It was the kind of declaration I’ve learned to trust because it stems from neither fear nor a desire to curry favor.

Despite having plenty of motivation to demand change — the frequent shortages, the decrepit housing, the cruelty of having one currency for tourists and another with far less buying power for Cubans — she said she feared change more than she feared the status quo. Then she checked the hallway again.

Such skittishness might seem odd to Americans. After all, change seems to be on the lips of every candidate back home.

But just as Americans are debating what change means, and how to accomplish it, Cubans see change in many different ways. After Fidel’s announcement, the Communist Party newspapers and state-controlled television mockingly dismissed foreign news reports that change was suddenly in the air over Cuba. “They talk about a coming epoch of change, as if the revolution hasn’t been an epoch of change from the beginning,” Lázaro Barredo Medina, editor in chief of the party daily Granma, said in one broadcast.

Truth is, things have changed since my first trip to Cuba in 1978. The heavy presence of the Soviet Union then is a faint shadow now, reflected in blue-eyed Cubans named Yuri. There seem to be more new cars on the roads, more fast food on the street, and more buildings undergoing repair. There even seem to be more buses and fewer people waiting for them since Fidel’s younger brother and temporary replacement, Raúl, publicly demanded that something be done about the pitiful mass transit system when I was here just a year ago.

But much has not changed, or has gotten worse. More families live two or three generations in the same cramped apartments. Detention, interrogation and other troubles still descend on people who dissent in ways as small as wearing a plastic wrist band embossed with the word “cambio,” which means change. The press is still controlled, and disloyalty to the Communist Party still raises the suspicion of neighbors that can lead to the loss of a job or a house. Dissidents remain enemies of the state.

Still, many people we met shared a fear expressed by Miguel, a 62-year-old retired army lieutenant colonel who lives in Alamar, just outside Havana. He drives a 1958 Dodge with bad brakes and a top speed of about 37, which is the number of years he has owned it. He said he worried about only one thing after Mr. Castro: what he called the Americanization of Cuba.

By that he meant a savage capitalism that might take away from Cubans the best houses, the best land, the best factories. In short, if a transition means that the little they have managed to acquire might be taken away, he’d rather not change.

Cuba is not a country where change has ever come easily; when it has come, injustice and violence often were its companions. Cubans know that what the Cuban-American analyst Marifeli Pérez-Stable of the Inter-American Dialogue calls Cuba’s “long century” — the turbulent period that began with the wars of independence from Spain in the mid-19th century and continues today — has brought little peace.

The revolution itself has left many Cubans, including our relatives here, fed up with promises of change. They

long ago tired of sacrificing for an ideal tomorrow; when we finally got together, three days after Fidel's announcement, Miriam's stepbrothers and sisters told me their main concerns are getting enough to eat, getting shoes for their children and getting to work on time each day.

Cuba's leaders also fear sudden change because it would undermine the official legend of a triumphant socialist revolution. As the 50th anniversary of Fidel Castro's Jan. 1, 1959, victory approaches, Cubans cannot escape the past. Film clips of Fidel fighting in the Sierra alongside [Che Guevara](#) are on TV every day. The 62-foot wooden pleasure boat "Granma" with which Castro and 81 insurgents launched their uprising in 1956 remains on display under glass in the center of Havana, a revolutionary Ark of the Covenant.

Of course, Fidel Castro has led the resistance to change, grasping power for so long that he has gone from fierce young rebel to doddering old man before the eyes of the world. Mostly bedridden for the last 19 months, he has stubbornly refused to step aside until now. But even a Maximum Leader cannot fend off time forever, or do anything to stop the impending loss of his friend and economic crutch, [Hugo Chávez](#), the Venezuelan leftist whose electorate has insisted that he abide by the country's term limits.

There is growing evidence that Mr. Castro's brother Raúl has grown impatient with his role as place holder and has been agitating for a permanent transfer of power. Although Raúl is considered the weaker of the two men, he has stood up to his older brother before. During Fidel's first trip to the United States in 1959, Raúl met him in a Houston hotel and told him to stop touring like a rock star and get back to serious business in Havana. Fidel returned shortly and adopted a decidedly tougher stance toward the United States.

As head of the armed forces since 1959, [Raúl Castro](#) has kept the army one of the few functional institutions in Cuba. His reputation today as an efficient manager is as strong as his revolutionary reputation was as an efficient executioner.

Whatever form a new Cuban regime takes — Raúl as president with younger, post-revolutionary officials arrayed as vice presidents or some surprise variation — Fidel's presence will continue to be felt, even if, as he has promised, he becomes a simple "soldier of ideas," dedicated to thinking and writing.

Sitting at an old Havana cafe, a friend put it to me this way: Fidel is like a huge [Airbus](#) that leaves so much turbulence in its wake that other aircraft cannot take off or land behind it until the air clears. Even in his absence from power, Fidel will shape the actions of whoever comes after him.

When [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#), the Brazilian president, heard about Mr. Castro's effective resignation he said: "Fidel is already a myth." Alejandro Rodriguez, a columnist for the newspaper Juventud Rebelde ("Rebel Youth," another name from revolutionary mythology) wrote last week that "Fidel is Cuba, because Juan, Pedro, Chico and Mariana are Fidel."

No one would have expected our children, Aahren, Andrés and Laura Felice, to feel like part of Cuba or Fidel as they gingerly set foot in their mother's homeland for the first time. They delighted in the beauty of the seacoast and the countryside, but grew upset as beggars and pimps tailed them in old Havana. The three peppered Miriam with questions, asking without fully realizing what they were saying, "What was it like when you were Cuban?" After bringing flowers to the tomb of the grandfather they never knew, squeezing into the sliver of a house where Miriam once lived, and peeking into the worn-out school that she had once

attended, they simply fell silent.

When they finally got to meet their Cuban family, an expected initial awkwardness soon gave way to discoveries of points of concurrence: the boredom of school, the frustration of seeking a first job, planning for the future.

But that is where the reality of our two worlds imposed itself. Aahren, our oldest son, had just become a lawyer; his cousin Aidan and a friend had just figured out a way to grind up pork into ham that they smoke for 12 hours in a makeshift hothouse in the yard. Aahren is planning a full life ahead; Aidan dreams of taking to the sea.

“Cubans today are not like the Cubans of the 1950s,” Aidan said. He thinks that 50 years of worrying about getting enough to eat has beaten the heart out of them. Inside their refrigerator were the eight eggs per month they are rationed, and little else.

Given time it might be possible to bridge the gap between their dreams. But for that to happen, there will have to be change.

Their 81-year-old Cuban grandmother is ill now, and if she does not survive, our children will not be able to go back to Cuba unless American laws change; they do not now permit visits to see uncles and cousins.

Miriam, close to tears, told me she would never go back because too much has already changed.

Of course, there will shortly be new presidents in both Cuba and the United States. If that changes things, that would be big news, and I will be back.

Anthony DePalma is the author of “The Man Who Invented Fidel: Castro, Cuba and Herbert L. Matthews of The New York Times.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 2, 2008

An article last Sunday about Cubans’ reactions to the departure of Fidel Castro as president misspelled the hometown of a retired Army officer named Miguel whose opinion was cited. The town is Alamar, not Altamar.

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